



hey were throwing dirt on her grave last week, and it still didn't stop Modjeska from raising hell.

After the funeral, I went by the grave to say good-bye. I picked a flower and told the gravedigger, "That's a mighty fine woman you're burying." He stopped, leaned on his shovel and said, "Mister, you're going to have to go somewhere else to find someone who doesn't know that."

He then told me a story about how 20 years ago he had been fired from the sheriff's department over a racial issue. His friends told him to go see Mrs. Simkins. "I didn't know her, but I went to her house and told her what happened. She told me, 'They can't fire you for that, you go back to work tomorrow.' I don't know what she told the sheriff, but I went to work the next day and had a job."

The stories about Modjeska Simkins' gutsy compassion literally followed her to the grave.

When I met Modjeska nearly 20 years ago, I was a young activist and she was a 70-year-old clerk in the little bank her family had started in the 1920s. She was also a greater and more dynamic part of history than the rest of the folks in South Carolina combined.

Modjeska was born in Columbia in 1899. Her grandmother was a slave and later a nursemaid for the Montieth family. Her grandfather was a Montieth, a white Montieth. There was never any shame or denial in either the black or white part of the family about the mixed blood. I once had a friend who worked for Edmond Montieth, a prominent white attorney, who is Modjeska's nephew once removed. My friend knew of the familial link, but was cautious about raising the issue, afraid it would bring a denial. One day when Modjeska was in the news for raising hell about something, Montieth volunteered, "Yeah, that's my auntie, she's the outspoken one in the family."

Modjeska grew up during a time when blacks were kept in place by Jim Crow laws as well as outright violence. She told of a time her father took her to see a black man who had been lynched. "He wanted me to know how serious the struggle was," she explained.

Her father, Walter, was a successful brick mason who raised a respectable middle-class family. In the 1920s, her family helped start Victory Savings Bank, the only black-owned bank in the state and one of three banking institutions to survive the Depression. Her brother was a medical doctor who maintained a family practice above the Lincoln Street bank for more than 30 years.

At a time when few women and fewer blacks went to college, Modjeska graduated from Benedict College in 1921, did graduate work at Columbia University and got a masters degree in public health from the University of Michigan. Modjeska taught at Booker T. Washington High in Colum-

Modjeska

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bia until 1929, when she married. She was fired because married women were not allowed to teach in Columbia's public schools.

From 1931 until 1942, Modjeska traveled the state as the Director of Negro Work for the S.C. Tuberculosis Association. TB was ravaging the poor, rural black population. Like every task she took on, her work was not just a job, it was a cause. She was fired in 1941 for refusing to sever ties with the NAACP, an organization considered subversive by the TB Association.

Modjeska helped found the SC NAACP as one of that organization's first statewide efforts in 1939. She remembered the Niagara Movement, the predecessor to the NAACP. Traveling the backroads of South Carolina as the State Secretary until 1955, she was preaching equality when segregation was the law and the Klan was a violent reality. She said she "went to towns that were so small that God created them as an afterthought late Saturday night. The Klan would follow me into and out of town."

Modjeska worked on the famous *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case and used to put up Thurgood Marshall when he came to the state as the NAACP lawyer. She had a motel for "discriminating colored tourists" which was the only respite in the area for the likes of Paul Robeson, Count Bassie and Duke Ellington.

She always resented being called a black activist because she "liked people because they are people. And I believe in fighting against injustice. Black, Indian, Chicano — it doesn't matter to me." While, "naturally as a black woman, I have been especially sensitive to the needs of my people," Modjeska always insisted she was a "human rights activist."

Modjeska never took to labels. Her politics were never "right" or "left," but simply right or wrong. She was a Republican before the white-only, Democratic primaries were struck down in 1940. In the 1950s and 1960s, she was accused of being a Communist. She was a friend of Herbert Aptheker, a noted Communist of the McCarthy era, and was visited by Communist Party officials into the 1980s. When the Democratic party, at

the urging of S.C. Congressman Albert Watson, a member of the infamous House of Un-American Activities Committee, tried to eject her, she said, "I am not, and have never been, a Communist. Sure I signed some petitions, I'm against transgressions of civil liberties. The trouble with some people is that they read all this stuff in the papers, but they don't read with understanding."

Modjeska had almost as much trouble identifying herself a Democrat as a Communist. She considered herself a "national Democrat, but on the local level I'm Independent." She once told an interviewer, "I'll tell you one thing about the Democratic Party. Here in South Carolina they try to sell it as the party of the black man. Well, they may fool some folks, but they don't fool me. All the harm that's been done to my people has been done by the Democrats — without doing a damn thing for them."

Modjeska felt that feminism transcended racial concerns. "Men have messed up the world," she once said. "The women produce the babies, and then the men send them off to die in places like Vietnam". She advised, "A woman should be prepared to support herself, to be independent. That way, she'll be better off, no matter what she decides to do — career, wife and mother, whatever. The greatest disappointment of my life was that women did not take hold right away. I was so sure that they'd take what they'd worked so hard to earn and turn this world around."

Modjeska was one of the first black leaders to champion the environmental cause. In speaking out against the hazards of the Savannah River Plant in the late 1970s, she wondered "how some folks think they breathe different air than the rest of us."

Modjeska's down-home, common sense approach could always be trusted to cut through the bullshit of politics. She told me more than once to do what I thought was right and to stop worrying so much about alienating people.

She was born when horses and buggies brought legislators to the capitol, but was the most new-age person I have ever known. She was in the forefront of every politically correct battle long before it was in vogue — because it was right. She fought long and sometimes lonely struggles for equality and justice, not because she thought she would win, but because she simply "knew better."

"I don't want to see anybody suffer, and I will fight for anybody who is suffering," she said in an interview 20 years ago. "You know we are all a part of humanity, and when one of us loses, we all lose. When one human being dies, each of us dies a little bit too."

Amen, Modjeska. We are all a little bit less for your passing, but our loss will never offset your profound contributions. You were one of the rare ones that left much more on this earth than you found. You left each of us some mighty big shoes that we have no excuse but to try and fill.